

# The Clipper Visits Helen Hanigan

by Judy Foley



Helen Hanigan

Helen Hanigan has seen the changes time has etched on Duxbury.

Six years ago when she reached retirement age, the spritely matron of the school administration left her job as secretary for former superintendent Lawrence Anderson. Since then, she has watched sweeping changes in the school administration she served for 20 years.

She has witnessed an even deeper metamorphosis in Duxbury since she was born in what was a small country village in 1910.

Through the changes, or perhaps despite them, she has kept a quiet niche for herself in the town she recalls as "real rural." Although she left as a young girl and eventually spent nearly 30 years away, she returned in 1949 and worked here until just a few months ago.

At 70, she remains healthy and robust; pleasant and unpretentious. Helen recently succumbed to *Clipper* proddings and retraced her life and the roots that bind her to her hometown.

Her mother, Minnie Ferrell Hanigan, grew up on Prior Farm on Captain's Hill at the base of the Standish Monument. From the farm where her grandfather raised cows, one could survey a commanding view of the horizon. Her hands ran familiarly through Dorothy Wentworth's *Settlement and Growth of Duxbury*, and she fingered early illustrations of Prior Farm. "There were no trees on the hill to the monument -- they were just bushes then," she said. "From the base you could see the farm and all the way across the peninsula, and the same distance on the other side to Kingston and Plymouth." Later, as she talked about years in New York City, she would say it was the yearning for "open space" that lured her back to Duxbury.

Her father, Harold Hanigan ("with one n, maybe a faction of an old Irish clan..."), was born in the Frankland Miles house on Tremont St. Both parents went to Partridge Academy, and Harold Hanigan worked for the Anglo-American Cable Co.

Helen was born in the house opposite the present American Legion, and grew up on St. George St. As a child, she played neighborhood sports, basketball and baseball. "We never played softball -- it was baseball. We'd scout around the neighborhood until

we found enough boys and girls for 2 sides." Today she remains an avid sports fan, and vowed the TV would be on during the *Clipper* visit if there were a game on.

She wouldn't learn to roller skate until she moved to New York at 13. "There were mostly dirt roads in Duxbury. When I was 6, they paved St. George St., one of the first. I remember watching, fascinated by the steam rollers."

With no cars, and carriages reserved for a few, "We walked," she said. "The family would pack a lunch and walk to Duxbury Beach, joining friends on the way. My father would walk ahead and dig buckets of clams, and we dug shallow beds in the sand and had some great clambakes. I often walked with my mother to Prior Farm from St. George St. to visit my grandmother, or we could take the train from station to station for 10 cents." Today, she claims she can still walk for distances, although she no longer parades on July 4 as she did for years.

She leafed through *Settlement and Growth of Duxbury* again until she found Ford's store, considered the first department store in the country. The dry goods store in the Millbrook area of Tremont St. sold food, hardware, kerosene, hats, "anything from pulpits to caskets." The long row of attached wooden shops, filled with combustibles, burnt down in 1920.

Helen went to the 4-grade, one room Point School, now Manion Hall, the Holy Family Church parish center. St. George St., without the school campus, looked much the same as it does today. "The high school was the Wright Estate, with stables and formal gardens on the grounds. Where they put the parking lot was once rows of forsythia." Her mind, lost in her youth for the moment, snapped back. "Such is progress."

She lived on Pine Hill Ave. for a time, but in 1923 her parents moved to NYC where her father began work for the Knott Hotels. "Much to my disgust," she said. "I was a little country girl thrown into a big city school. I was lost. In the first year, I think I missed an English class once a week."

The Hanigans moved later to Connecticut, where Helen found life more compatible. "There was space at least, flowers and trees." She graduated from Norwich Free Academy in 1927 and from Packard Commercial School in NYC in 1930, after going through the 10-month course in 4 months.

There was little work in Duxbury for secretaries, so Helen stayed in the city. She worked for Knott Hotels, first as bookkeeper and secretary, rising to assistant manager to manager. "It was okay if you liked working with people. I often had to evict a few, but there were never any real problems." She ran a private hotel with cottages for 2 summers in Chester-town, NY, but grew more restless for Duxbury. "The city was just not my cup of tea."

She returned in 1949 and found clerical work in the William F. Clapp Laboratories, Inc., the marine research center on Washington St. "Dr. Clapp was an old friend of my father's. They sang together; he as tenor, my father as baritone." Clapp, who never lived to see the small labs he started in Duxbury evolve into the reknown research center it has become, "was a bit eccentric, like all bosses," she said.

In 1954, school superintendent Everett Handy asked her to work for him. "His secretary, ironically, had just inherited a boarding house on the Cape and left to run it; I had just come back from running a hotel."

When Helen began work with the schools, there were 2 buildings and less than 50 teachers. "They added a wing to the lower school that year, and that took care of the population for a few years."

But Duxbury would grow to unfathomed figures

during her 20-year tenure. Three new schools were eventually added --the high school, intermediate school and finally, Chandler. "Part of my work entailed composing charts for the school committee to try and determine the next year's enrollment." Duxbury's still-intact rural characters were attracting thousands. "A lot of people moved from the city with their families to live in the country."

Helen stayed through 2 administrations, Dr. Handy and Anderson. She retired in December, 1974, with over 300 residents attending a party in her honor. Former assistant superintendent Tom Lanman took the occasion to write this:

"How does one characterize Helen? Capable? Certainly. Loyal? Without question. Hard working? Definitely. Kindness? Personified. Who was it who always had a cheery good morning at 8 a.m. when the school committee meeting had gone on until 1 a.m. the night before, and things had not gone well! Helen.

"Who was it who brought you that cup of coffee after you had spent an hour with an irate parent whose son had been suspended from riding the school bus for hitting the driver on the back of the head with a snowball as she proceeded along Washington St.? (After all Mr. Lanman, boys have to sow a few wild oats before they grow up; what's wrong with throwing a snowball?) Again, it was Helen. Who was it who found out that your child was starting a stamp collection and 'just happened' to have a few stamps for him? It was Helen.

"The list is endless."

After leaving the schools, she worked for a short time as executive secretary for the housing authority's elderly housing complex, Duxborough Village. Until last February, she worked part-time at the Walter Prince St. George St. garage.

She's lost little of the vitality that has marked her years in Duxbury. She still does typing for a fee, and donates time to the Unitarian Church, where she was recently appointed assistant treasurer. "I'm usually around if they need a check signed or a bank transaction."

In one corner of her small Chestnut St. home is a Harriett Ford watercolor of the house where her great-grandmother lived, now the Cranberry Cottage. "Anyone who has an old house in Duxbury probably has one of Ford's paintings," she said. Her ties with the town and its past remain deep. Through the changes, shifts and transitions, Helen Hanigan has endured under the shadow of the monument.